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# CH'AN NEWS LETTER

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## The Sense Organs of the Ear and Nose and Their Sense objects

*(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng-yen Sunday, December 21, 1986)*

The Buddha continues to explain the relationship of the sense organs and sense objects to Ananda. In today's selection he explains the relationship of the ear to sound and the nose to smell.

The first passage concerns the ear and sound. The Buddha asks Ananda to reflect on the sound of the drum that is beaten to alert the Assembly that food is ready and the sound of the bell which tells the Assembly to come together. He asks whether sounds come to the ear or the ear goes out to the sounds. Proceeding with this argument, the Buddha shows that hearing and sound have no location, and that they are neither causal, conditional, nor self-existent; hence, both are false.

Common sense tells us that sound comes to the ears and it is the ears that hear sound. There is no doubt about this. But to show us the ultimate falsity of both the sense organ of the ear and sound, the sutra adopts the rhetorical method of seeking for a true, absolute, unchanging existence to these phenomena. Thus if sound had a true existence of its own, there would be no need for the ears to hear it. And by the same token, if the ears were self-existent, sound would already be present within them, and there would be no need for hearing to occur. The sutra tells us, then, that there is no such thing as hearing existing by itself, because only the interaction of the sense organ of the ear and sound allows hearing to occur.

In explaining this the Buddha uses traveling as an analogy. He states that if he were originally in one place, and then traveled somewhere else, he would no longer be in the place from which he started his journey. This is simply to say that a person can't be in two different places at the same time. According to Buddhist logic, if a person had true self-existence, he would be everywhere at the same time. Applying this reasoning to sound as something with intrinsic self-existence, you cannot say that it is something that was at first not present, originated elsewhere, and then finally came to be here. This is not the understanding of Buddhadharma. Yes, common sense tells us that sound originates from somewhere and enters our ears. But in understanding Buddhadharma, we must separate what we call sound and what we call the sense organ of hearing. What is the relationship between them? If none of us had ears, would sounds exist? From the point of view of Buddhadharma, neither the sense organ nor its object has true existence.

Most of us believe that sound enters our ears rather than the other way around. But if one hundred people hear a sound, the sound as a self-existent

entity cannot be said to simply arrive at only one person's ears. On the other hand, if we consider the ears as something subjective which extend out to sound, how in the example given could the disciples hear so many different sounds? How could their ears go out to so many different places?

To summarize, the sutra first refutes the argument that sound has an intrinsic existence. It next refutes the concept that the sense organ of the ear has an exclusive role in hearing. The sutra then speaks of causes and conditions, the idea of interdependency among things. Thus in order for a sound to be heard, there must be both ear and sound. If these two elements are lacking, there is no hearing. Hearing, then, occurs only by virtue of the simultaneous arising of the sense organ of the ear and sound.

The sutra states that all dharmas (i.e., phenomena) arise from causes and conditions and thus are ever changing. But even to hold to this understanding that all is change can in itself spawn attachment. However, you cannot say that phenomena simply arise spontaneously, by accident. There ARE causes and conditions. Actually, in the final analysis, you can neither assert nor refute their existence.

This section of the sutra teaches us to cut through our attachment to sound. We know that there are pleasant sounds and repulsive sounds, whether they are produced by humans, animals, or inanimate objects. Both the pleasing and the repulsive lead to attachment, and therefore to vexation. But the sutra teaches that sound has no real existence and that our ears do not really hear sounds. It is really an illusion that we experience. If we could thoroughly understand this, we would be more detached from our surroundings. Note that detachment does not mean lack of involvement.

This understanding of the true nature of the ear and sound can be used as a method of practice.

It is not meant to be a scientific argument to refute the existence of sound. It is simply a method to help our practice.

Many sounds can cause us distress. Take the sound of a saw on dry wood. It may feel as if it is enough to make the ears explode. Perhaps the goose, which has no ears, is the best practitioner. It will be undisturbed by any noise.

What do you think is the most beautiful sound? It depends on who you are. If you are in love, it will be the sound of your boyfriend or girlfriend. If you are a father or a mother, it is the sound of your child's laughter. Even if you are beset with heavy vexations, such sounds may relieve your distress for the moment.

There is perhaps more agreement on what the worst sounds are. But for me it is the sound of my own voice. I really detest it.

The sutra shows us that sound has no intrinsic existence. Whatever you hear has nothing to do with you. You may hear it, but it has no meaning for you.

We have plans to move the Center to a different building. In the last few days we had to sign a contract and deal with a nitpicking lawyer. The buyer didn't mind the parking lot at the back of the Center, but the lawyer made a big deal out of it. This is just one example of how two people can have totally different views of the same thing. Once again it depends on causes and conditions. If you have an argument with your spouse, his or her voice can suddenly seem quite unpleasant indeed. Attitude is all. We should have the attitude that when we hear sounds, they are only sounds and nothing more. They have nothing to do with us.

Generally speaking, on the first day of a retreat, practitioners are very aware of the sounds around them. On the second or third day, however, most

practitioners will no longer be aware of outside sounds unless their minds are scattered. The sounds still exist and the ears continue to function, but the practitioner no longer uses his sense organ. The relationship between the sound and the ear is severed. Thus the practitioner no longer hears sounds.

When I was living in mainland China, I saw a woman who had a number of very small children. I knew that one child can be noisy enough, two can create a real racket, and seven or eight would be bedlam. I couldn't imagine how anyone could survive so much disruptive noise, so I asked her how she managed to get through her day with the constant din. She simply told me, "I don't hear anything." She wasn't deaf. She just didn't hear the noise, or more accurately, she didn't pay any attention to it. In that respect she's a good practitioner. But it is most probable that she would only be able to tolerate the sound of her own children. Someone else's might annoy her.

If you can adopt the methods described in the sutra, you can sever the tie between the sense organ and the sound. You have to make this a regular focus of contemplation, however. Eventually you can arrive at the state where you can hear any sound and not be vexed by it.

However, it wouldn't be a good idea to try to adopt this method at school. In Taiwan there are numerous cases of people going on retreat, returning to school, and then claiming that they can't hear the professor, that they don't know what he's talking about. So some people might wonder about the merits of a Ch'an retreat. Once you go, you seem to come back an idiot.

What the sutra describes is a method and an understanding to be used in the right situation and in the proper way.

The next section of the sutra is concerned with the sense organ and sense object of the nose. The

Buddha uses the example of burning sandalwood to illustrate his point. Once again he shows that a sense, in this case smelling, is neither causal, conditional, nor self-existent. To accomplish this he poses a question about the origin of smelling. From where does it originate, the sandalwood, the nose, or the void? The smell cannot originate from the nose, because the nose is not sandalwood. And if it originates from the wood, then the nose should be filled with incense smoke. Yet the sutra tells us that the fragrance can be smelled for a distance of about thirteen miles, far beyond the reaches of the sandalwood smoke. And how could it come from the void, which is eternal and unchanging? If this were so the fragrance would be eternally present, and there would be no need to light incense.

Common sense tells us that odors and fragrances originate from without and are smelled by the nose. But the sutra, using the same dialectic it has from the outset, shows that there is no intrinsic existence to the nose and its sense object, that which is smelled.

The sutra says that it is the coming together of causes and conditions that allows smelling to take place. The nose can distinguish fragrant and repulsive, and to some extent it can distinguish various tastes, sour, pungent, bitter, sweet. Perhaps the nose is more powerful than the tongue, which cannot distinguish odor or fragrance.

Humans have a fairly sensitive sense of smell, not as powerful as that of dogs, but certainly more acute than that of birds.

It is a good thing for us to have sharp senses, if we wish to survive. It gives us a better chance in difficult situations. But in practice, we try to close up the five senses. In this way we reduce our vexations.

When I was living in Tokyo, I visited an old Dharma master. I kept him company in the

mountains. One day he said that he wanted some coffee. I said, "But master, how can we get coffee up here?" I didn't notice anything, but he could really smell it. The master insisted that there must be some place in the village that was selling coffee. Indeed, when we went down to the village, we found that there was a store that had it. The master had such an acute sense of smell that it led him to feel thirsty when he smelled coffee, and it caused him to desire some to drink. Such sense acuity can lead to trouble.

Once I was in the mountains and didn't realize what a long way I had to go before I reached my destination. I had no food with me. At one point I smelled some food frying. I became very hungry and my stomach started to growl. The smell had come from some distance. Later I saw the family that was frying the food, but I couldn't ask for any. The tradition of begging for food doesn't exist in China, although it does in India. I had no recourse but to forget about my stomach and to keep on walking.

There are so many pleasing smells and so many repulsive ones. It is really difficult to reach the stage where you are no longer affected by any odor or fragrance.

I asked Sheila how long she had been a vegetarian, and she said five years. She said that the smell of meat doesn't bother her. But I get a headache from the smell of meat. I can't even get close to certain restaurants that cook meat. Maybe it's some kind of an allergy. Perhaps my practice isn't what it should be if these smells still bother me.

The scent of your body depends upon the food you eat. Some people find certain body scents more repulsive than others. But what is repulsive for one person may be attractive to another. If you find the scent of another person's body attractive, it probably means that you have good karmic

affinity with him or her.

The responses we have correspond to how we are constituted physically. Thus, different individuals have different attachments. However, the basic principle is still the same: it is the interaction of the scent and the nose that leads to attachment and vexation. Again, if you can end the relationship between the sense organ and its object, attachment and vexation will lessen.

In reality, then, there is no such thing as a fragrant or a unpleasant smell. Smell itself has no intrinsic self-existence. It is the coming together of nose and scent that produces the sense of smell. So, as the sutra says, both nose and smell are neither causal, conditional, nor self-existent.

Most sentient beings are afflicted with greed, anger and hatred. They have greed for pleasant smelling things and hatred for bad odors. Hatred can lead to anger, and in every case, vexation. It is to lessen these things that we practice.

There is a Chinese saying: Stay long enough in a greenhouse, and the fragrance will no longer please you. Likewise, you lose your sensitivity to a foul smell after some time. Maybe if I were forced to stay in a restaurant that serves meat, I would get over my reaction to the smells and my headaches would stop.

There is an important point concerning the Chinese saying. There is a danger in becoming used to some things. If you continually generate bad karma, you might become accustomed to it, and you will lose your conscience and begin to feel no remorse for what you do. This is a misunderstanding of non-attachment. It does not mean simply taking things lightly with no thought to the consequences. What we should try to do is to plant the seeds of merit and virtue.

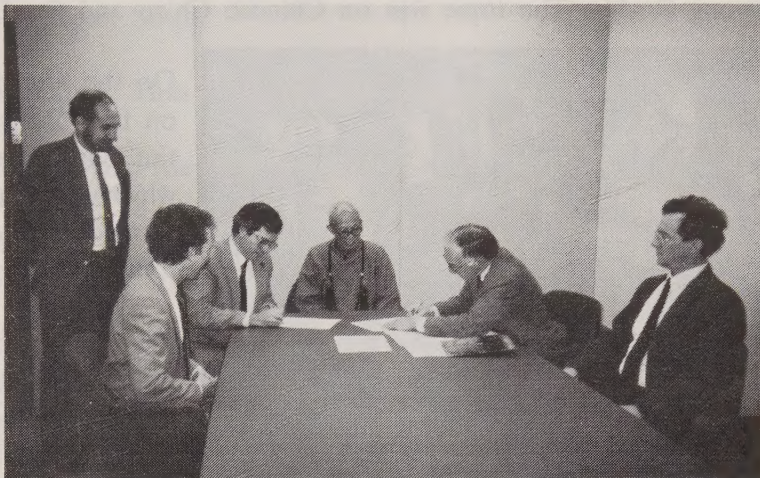
## News Items

On October 14, Shih-fu went to the University of Michigan to speak about the Institute of Chung-hwa Buddhist Studies. Afterwards, Shih-fu, Vice President Harold K. Jacobson and Prof. Luis Gomes, the chairperson of Buddhist Literature Studies, participated in a ceremony to inaugurate a study exchange program.

From October 17 to 19 Shih-fu gave a lecture series at Mio Tien Assembly Hall in Hong Kong. The audience numbered over 1000.

On October 21 Shih-fu, accompanied by Paul Kennedy and Avy Wu, went to San Francisco to begin a nine-day lecture tour.

On October 22 Shih-fu was invited to the University of California Berkeley to lecture to the students of Buddhist Studies. That evening, Shih-fu went to the Berkeley Zen Center to deliver a lecture on Chinese Ch'an. Shojun Mel Weltsman Roshi presided.



*Picture from left to right, Kenneth Dewoskin, Prof. Donald Lopez, Prof. Luis Gomez, Shih-fu, Dr. Harold K. Jacobson, and Prof. Griffith Faulk.*



*Abbot of San Francisco Zen Center, Sojun Mel Weltsman Roshi and Shih-fu.*

On the afternoon of Oct. 23 Shih-fu visited Green Gulch Farm Zen Center and was greeted by Norman Fisher. That night Shih-fu was invited to give a lecture at Sonoma Mountain Zen Center by Jakusho Kwong Roshi. The topic was on Chinese Ch'an and the Ch'an Hall.



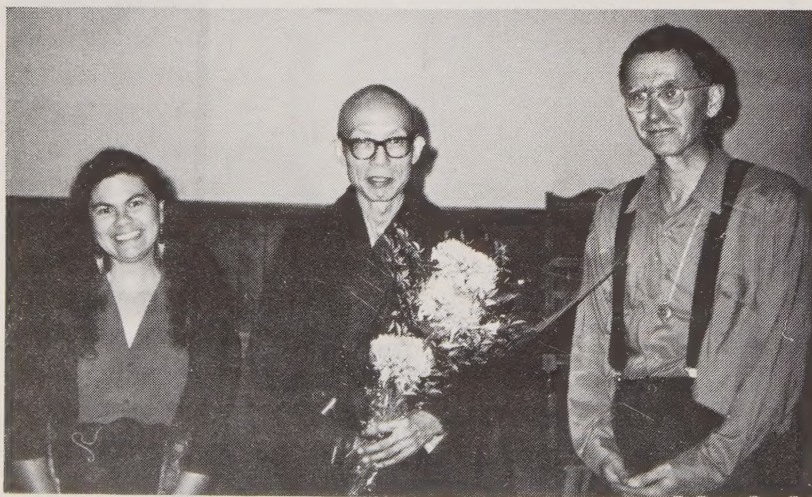
*Abbot of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center Jakusho Kwong Roshi and Shih-fu.*

On the afternoon of October 24, Shih-fu gave a talk on the "Principle and Methods of Ch'an Practice" at the East Asian Study Center of Stanford University, which was hosted by Philip J. Inonha. That evening Shih-fu again spoke at the San Francisco Zen Center. His topic was the "Song of the Precious Mirror Samadhi."

On October 25 Shih-fu was invited to the S. F. General Hospital to deliver a lecture to over 100 doctors and nurses on "Buddhism and the Healthy Mind." Later, he went to Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple to lecture on "Buddhism and Its Role in Everyday Life." Upasika Yeh Min was the host that evening.

On October 27 Shih-fu delivered a talk at the American Chinese Cultural Educations Center to over 200 people on the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Later that evening Shih-fu went to the house of the chairperson of the Buddhist Society where he led a question and answer session. Over 50 people attended.

October 27, Shih-fu conducted a Beginners Meditation class for 42 participants at the Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple. That evening 28 people took refuge in the Three Jewels. Later that same evening Shih-fu



*Stephen T. Scully and Carole Brodsky from Ukiah Sarwa Dharma Center with Shih-fu.*

visited the California Institute of Integral Studies to join in a discussion which was organized by Prof. Wu.

On the afternoon of October 29, Shih-fu was invited to Ukiah to speak to the Ukiah Sarwa Dharma and The Buddhist Peace Fellowship where he delivered a talk on inner and outer peace.

October 30, Shih-fu returned to New York. The following night Shih-fu resumed the Wednesday night Special Class to continue speaking on the Heart Sutra.

On November 4 Shih-fu spoke on "Thus Come, Thus Gone."

November 6, Shih-fu spoke on "The Principles and Methods of Ch'an" at Columbia University. Paul Kennedy was the translator.

On November 17 Shih-fu lectured at the Taiwan Center in Flushing on the topic of Emotion vs. Principle. Three hundred people attended.

On November 21, The Buddhist Council of N.Y. video taped and interviewed Shih-fu for a cable TV program.

The fiftieth retreat at the Center was held from November 23 to December 1. Thirty-four people, one from as far as Iceland, participated.

On December 8, Shih-fu lectured at the Chuang Yen Monastery on "Carrying Water and Chopping Wood with Ch'an." On this day there was also a one-day sitting meditation session.

December 15: A one-day recitation of Buddha's name.

December 22: The Beginner's Meditation Class

The fifty-first retreat, December 25 to January 1, had 36 participants.

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